DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 190 122 IR 008 607

AUTHOR Dates, Jannette Lake
TITLE The Relationship Between Race and Racial Attitudes and Adolescent Perceptions of Black Television Characters.
PUB DATE Apr 80
NOTE 28p.: Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (Denver, CO, April 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *Black Stereotypes; *Commercial Television; High School Students; *Racial Attitudes; *Racial Identification; Television Surveys; Television Viewing

ABSTRACT

This study conducted with eleventh graders in the Baltimore City Public Schools was based on a correlational survey which explored the relationship between viewer perceptions of black television characters, race, racial attitudes, and viewing frequency. One questionnaire measured viewing frequency, the viewer's perceptions of eight black and non-black television characters, the characters' degree of reality, and the degree of viewer identification with the characters. The Multifactor Racial Attitude Inventory (MRAI) was also used to measure different aspects of attitudes toward blacks. The study found that black shows are watched more by black adolescents than by white teenagers; that non-blacks rated general-audience characters higher than did black respondents 66 percent of the time; that blacks rated black characters higher than did non-blacks 100 percent of the time; that blacks tended to believe black characters were more true-to-life than non-blacks did; and that there was no evidence of consistent patterns or trends relative to racial attitude and viewer perceptions of television characters. Tables illustrating the findings are provided. (FM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED190122

The Relationship Between Race and Racial Attitudes and Adolescent Perceptions of Black Television Characters

by

Jannette Lake Dates
Department of Speech Communication
and Theatre Arts

Morgan State University
Baltimore, Maryland

The Annual Convention of the
Association for Educational Communications
and Technology
April 1980

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jannette L. Dates

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

IR008607

5-27

THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN RACE, RACIAL ATTITUDES AND ADOLESCENT PERCEPTIONS OF BLACK TELEVISION CHARACTERS

Viewers bring their individual and group-specific beliefs, attitudes and experiences to each television experience.[1] Various international studies of adolescent television use reveal similar findings.[2]

In order to consolidate identity, adolescents must learn something about the adult world and appropriate roles in that world. Quite often, they turn to television for help. Adolescents sometimes experimentally emulate television personalities and behavior patterns of television characters.[3]

Greenberg and his associates have conducted several mass media and minority group studies.[4] Their findings reveal that black and white youngsters identify with black television characters; white youngsters who watch blacks most on television are more likely to believe that real-life blacks are accurately portrayed; both social class and race differences are found for many behaviors and attitudes; young television "fans" have strong beliefs in the reality of television; and viewers who perceive a greater amount of similarity between themselves and the character are more affected by television.

Television has been labeled as a medium that stereotypes almost all groups;[5] however, its stereotypes are especially damaging to minority groups.[6] Many people believe that television serves as a reinforcer and a source of ethnic stereotypes.[7] Greenberg and Atkin, Banks, and Molden believe that black stereotypes present a major problem to society.[8] The problem centers around the negative beliefs blacks hold about themselves, and others hold about blacks, that are nurtured by the stereotypes. A complex system generates from such stereotyping featuring, for example, self-fulfilling prophesies of failure and ineptness and cycles of poverty, disillusionment and crime, among others.

Reference Group Theory among mass communication theorists suggests that reference group identification may occur by means of mediated communication.[9] Surlin and Bowden argue that if a television viewer can construe cognitive structure of television characters, then reference group identifications with television characters may parallel effects from true interpersonal interaction with a "significant other." They found that using Archie Bunker as a "referent significant other" leads to an increase in authoritarian beliefs and thinking, as viewers who are cognitively similar to Archie have their beliefs raised to a level of consciousness and then

reinforced. They believe this leads to greater degrees of prejudice, close-mindedness and non-coping behavior.[10]

Modeling or social learning theory would predict that the stereotypical behavior patterns of black television characters causes frequent viewers, who identify with the characters, to model their own attitudes and behaviors after those of the characters. As Brigham and Giesbrecht note, much contemporary research, usually on violence and aggression, supports the modeling-social learning theory.[11]

It was hypothesized, in line with Surlin and Bowden, and Brigham and Giesbrecht, that through television black viewers identify with black characters who are often stereotypical; viewers' values, attitudes and behavior patterns are reinforced by the television characterizations. In line with Greenberg, it was assumed that youngsters are especially susceptible to the influences of television characters.

The correlational survey reported here, conducted with eleventh graders in the Baltimore City Public Schools, provides an opportunity for the investigator to explore the relationship between viewer perceptions of black television characters, race, racial attitudes and viewing frequency.

STUDY

Based on prior research, the researcher expects to find that black subjects will: 1) watch more black television programs than non-blacks, 2) evaluate black television characters more positively than non-blacks, 3) identify more with black television characters than with white ones, and 4) be less likely than their non-black counterparts to perceive black television characters as being accurately portrayed. A series of t-tests were conducted to test the significance of the difference between mean scores of the two racial groups.

The researcher also expected to find 1) a negative correlation between general racial attitudes and evaluative perceptions about black television images, 2) a negative correlation between general racial attitude and reality perceptions about black television characters, and 3) a negative correlation between general characters. Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated to index the relationship between racial attitudes and evaluative perceptions ("goodness" rating), reality perceptions and identification perceptions.

Eight high schools were purposively selected from among sixteen public schools such that there was a representative mix with respect to racial predominance, geographic location and socioeconomic levels. A questionnaire was developed by the investigator (based on the semantic differential techniques),[12] and the Multi-factor Racial Attitude Inventory

(MRAI)[13] was used to measure racial attitudes.

The viewer perception questionnaire allowed respondents to note their frequencies of viewing specified television programs. Frequency of television viewing was determined by a five point bi-polar scale anchored with "always watch" (scored 5) "never watch" (scored 1). Each of the eight television programs was rated along this scale by each subject. Respondents indicated their perceptions about each of the eight television characters by rating each character on nine evaluative semantic differential scales (Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum, 1971.) The scale pairs were: HONEST-DISHONEST, NICE-AWFUL, ATTRACTIVE-UGLY, FAIR-UNFAIR, BRAVE-COWARDLY, GOOD-BAD, SUCCESSFUL-UNSUCCESSFUL, MATURE-CHILDISH and THOUGHTFUL-THOUGHTLESS.

An evaluative score for every student was derived by summing across each scale and measuring the evaluative dimension for any particular target television character. Since there were twelve, five-point bi-polar scales, scores for each television character could range from 12 to 60. A higher score is indicative of a more positively evaluated character.

Two scales meaured "reality." In comparing the characters to

real-life people, respondents rated them as SIMILAR-DIFFERENT and BELIEVABLE-UNBELIEVABLE. Each scale ranged from one to five. Total scores, for this dimension could range from two to ten. The higher the score the stronger the "reality perception."

Two scales measured "identification." Each respondent rated his/her interest in being like the character as a LOT-NOT AT ALL and interest in doing things the character does as MANY THINGS-NOTHING AT ALL. Each scale ranged from one to five, with total scores ranging from two to ten. The higher the score, the stronger the "identification with the character."

The Multifactor Racial Attitude Inventory (MRAI) is composed of thirteen 10-item subscales, twelve of which measure different aspects of attitude toward blacks. The present study used six of the 13 dimensions deemed most appropriate for adolescents: Integration-Segregation Policy, Negro Inferiority, Derogatory Beliefs, Gradualism, Approaches to Negro Progress and Negro Militance. MRAI items include agree/disagree choices for statements such as "We should not integrate schools until blacks raise their standards of living."

A single attitude score was derived for the MRAI, which then yielded a range from 0-50. Subjects were given a point for each

emphathetic (positive) response. The higher the score the more positive the racial attitude.

RESULTS

Table I presents findings regarding average viewing of black and non-black shows by black and non-black viewers. For all three black shows ("Good Times," "The Jeffersons" and "What's Happening") the black viewing means are significantly higher; for all three general-audience shows, there were no significant differences in viewing levels between black and non-black viewers. Thus, this is evidence that black shows are watched by black adolescents to a greater degree than they are by white adolescents, but that for general-audience shows, there is a near equity. The expectation of heavy viewing of black television programs by blacks was supported.

These results bear similarity to recent findings, released by the A.C. Nielsen Company [14] showing that among adult non-white and white viewers there are more similarities than differences, and that black-oriented programming is heavily favored by non-white viewers.

REFER TO: TABLE I

Table II presents findings which relate race differences and viewer

perceptions of television characters. There is a strong pattern of differentiated perceptions by black and non-black respondents. Black characters are rated significantly higher by black respondents on the evaluative "goodness" dimension, the reality dimension and the identification dimension for all characters with the exception of Dee on the identification dimension. In contrast, non-black characters rated significantly higher by black respondents were a white male--Horschak--on both the evaluative and the reality dimensions, and Kotter, on the evaluative dimension. Non-blacks rated Chrissy significantly higher on the reality dimension that did blacks. An apparent trend is for whites to identify more with whites, but not significantly more than blacks identify with whites.

Non-blacks rated general-audience characters higher than black respondents on evaluative, reality and identification dimensions 66% of the time. Blacks rated black characters higher than non-blacks on all dimensions 100% of the time.

With respect to race and viewer perception of television characters, blacks as expected, evaluated black television characters significantly more positively than non-blacks and identified strongly with black television characters. Contrary to expectations, blacks tended to believe that black television characters were more true-to-life than

non-blacks. With the exception of one white male -- Horschak -- non-black respondents believed general-audience characters were more true-to-life than did black respondents but these were not significant differences.

REFER TO: TABLE II

Table III presents the findings which relate racial attitudes of the viewers to perceptions of black and non-black television characters. In the evaluation of these television characters, it is important to note that non-blacks with more positive racial attitudes were significantly more positive toward two black characters -- Dee and Louise* -- and more negative toward one white character, Chrissy. For black respondents, in contrast, there was no correlation between racial attitudes and evaluation of any of the characters, either black or non-black.

In terms of reality perceptions regarding these television characters, blacks with more positive racial attitudes were significantly more positive toward one black character -- George. There were no other significant

---

* Dee is a wise-cracking teen-ager while Louise is a "nouveau riche" wise-cracking housewife.

reality correlations for either black or non-black respondents.

In terms of identification by respondents with these television characters, blacks with more positive racial attitudes were significantly more negative toward one white character -- Laverne. The non-black respondents with more positive racial attitudes were significantly more negative toward one white character -- Chrissy.

Contrary to expectations, then, there were not negative correlations between general racial attitude and the evaluative dimension, the reality dimension or the identification dimension; there was no evidence of consistent patterns or trends relative to racial attitude and viewer perceptions of television characters.

TABLE III ABOUT HERE

DISCUSSION

The investigator sought to describe measureable relationships between race, racial attitude and adolescent perceptions of black television characters, theorizing that adolescent black viewers' attitudes and behavior patterns are reinforced by black television characterizations.

The findings provide supportive evidence for the belief that there is a strong relationship between race and perceptions of black television

characters; racial attitude is not strongly related to perceptions, however. Explanations include the possibility that 1) there is little relationship between racial attitude and perceptions of situation comedies, and 2) those with negative racial beliefs watch few black television programs and therefore make fewer judgments about black characters. Black adolescents consistently select black shows over other television offerings and exhibit a more favorable evaluation, perceived reality and identification with black characters. We can assume from the findings of the identification dimension that black adolescents probably use black TV characters as "referent significant others." As a result, many adolescent black viewers, reinforced by television characterizations may be assumed to perpetuate behavior exhibited by the characters.

Some of the specific findings deserve closer comment. In the correlation of racial attitude and viewer perceptions, Chrissy is viewed very negatively by non-prejudiced, non-blacks on the evaluative "goodness" dimension and the identification dimension; non-blacks strongly believe she is unrealistic. A possible explanation may be that those viewers with positive racial attitudes are those who perceive some stereotypes readily and see this character as the stereotypical "pretty dumb blonde."

Blacks and non-blacks alike find Laverne an appealing television character; the groups rate her very similarly on the reality and identification dimensions. Why is there this strong similarity of perception about one character between racial groups while exhibiting differentiated perceptions for another character?

An explanation worth pursuing in subsequent studies, is one which this investigator refers to as "the fallibility principle." This principle argues that characters such as "Lavern," "Lucy" and even "Archie" are seen as imperfect by those who watch them and this is part of their universal appeal. The obvious imperfections of the characters make the viewers feel better about themselves and their own lives. Viewers subconsciously say such things as: "I would not have made that mistake;" "That is funny because something similar happened to me." They can laugh at the character's weakness or silliness even if they can't laugh at their own. Because so often society has made blacks and other minority groups feel imperfect one can surmise that they readily emphathize with and relate to imperfect characterizations, black and white.

Further studies should include long range analyses and interpretations of why youngsters watch black programming, how they make decisions to incorporate new shows in with their established viewing

patterns, how new black oriented shows are received by black minority and non-black minority youngsters and how the new characters are perceived by youngsters; that is, are these stereotypical characters among the new shows, and do youngsters perceive these stereotypes?

NOTES

[1] See Emmett C. Lampkin, "Adolescent Television Use as a Possible Socialization Agent: A Cross-Cultural Comparison." (Ph.d. dissertation, Stanford University, 1976); John D. Leckenby and Stuart H. Surlin, "Race and Social Class Differences in Perceived Reality of Socially Relevant Television Programs for Adults in Atlanta and Chicago," a paper presented at the International Communication Association Convention, Mass Communication Division (Chicago, Illinois, April 1975).

[2] See H. T. Himmelweit and Betty Swift, "Continuities and Discontinuities in Media Usage and Taste: A Longitudinal Study," Journal of Social Issues, 32 (4): 133-155, 1976; Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle and Ewin Parker, Television in the Lives of Our Children, California: Stanford University Press, 1961; T. Furu, "The Function of Television for Children and Adolescents," Tokyo: Sophia University, 1971.

[3] See Marc D. Baranowski, "Television and the Adolescent," Adolescence, 6 (23): 369-396, 1971; Walter M. Gerson Media Socialization Behavior: Negro-White Differences," Social Forces, 45 (1): 40-50, 1966.

[4] See Bradley S. Greenberg, "Children's Reactions to Television

MORGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

ANTICIPATED ABSENCE REPORT
FOR ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICERS

Signature [signature]

Date of Filing April 21, 1980

	Beginning A.M.	P.M.	Date	Returning A.M.	P.M.	Date	Destination	Purpose
MONDAY	IN		4/21					
TUESDAY	IN		4/22					
WEDNESDAY	IN		4/23					
THURSDAY	IN		4/24					
FRIDAY	IN		4/25					

NOTES:

1. This form should be filed on Friday to cover the next work week. The form is to be filed whether or not you anticipate leaving the campus.

2. The form is to be filed in the Office of the Assistant to the President.

17

Blacks," Journalism Quarterly, 49 (1): 5-14, Spring 1972; Bradley S. Greenberg and Charles K. Atkin, "Learning about Minorities from Television: The Research Agenda," Paper prepared for the conference on Television and the Socialization of the Minority Child, University of California at Los Angeles, April, 1978; Bradley Greenberg and Brenda Dervin eds., Use of the Mass Media by the Urban Poor, New York: Praeger, 1970; Bradley Greenberg and Joseph Dominick, "Racial and Social Class Differences in Teen-Agers' Use of Television," Journal of Broadcasting, 13: 331-344, 1969. Stuart H. Surlin and Charles F. Cooper, "The Jeffersons and Their Racially Integrated Neighbors: Who Watches and Who is Offended?" Paper presented at the Southern Speech Communication Association, San Antonio, Texas, April, 1976; Stuart H. Surlin and Joseph R. Dominick, "Television's Function as a 'Third Parent' for Black and White Teen-Agers," Journal of Broadcasting, XV (1): 55-63, Winter, 1970-71.

5 See Richard Ozersky, "Television and Intimations of Life: Social and Thematic Patterns in Top-Rated Television Dramatic Programs During the Period 1950-1970, a descriptive study," Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1976; Charles Atkin and Mark Miller, "The Effects of Television Advertising on Children: Experimental Evidence,"

Paper presented to the Mass Communications Division at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association, April, 1975; Joseph Turow, "Casting for Television: An Organizational Approach to Stereotyping," Journal of Communications, 28 (4): 18-24, Autumn 1978.

6 See Cherry A. Banks, "A Content Analysis of the Treatment of Black Americans on Television," a paper presented to the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (National Institute of Education), Seattle, Washington, April 1976 (ERIC number 115 576); R. M. Liebert, J. M. Neale and E. S. Davidson, The Early Window: Effects of Television on Children and Youth, Elmsford, New York: Pergamon Press, 1973; Klairs R. Scherer, "Stereotype Change Following Exposure to Counter-Stereotyping Media Heroes," Journal of Broadcasting, XV (1): 51-99, Winter, 1970-71.

7 Klairs R. Scherer, "Stereotype Change Following Exposure to Counter-Stereotyping Media Heroes," Journal of Broadcasting, XV (1): 91-99; Cherry A. Banks, "A Content Analysis of the Treatment of Black Americans on Television," a paper presented to the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (National Institute of Education), Seattle, Washington, April 1976 (ERIC number 115 576); Rita Ricks Poulos, Susan E. Harvey and Robert M. Liebert, "Saturday Morning Television:

A Profile of the 1974-75 Children's Season," Psychological Reports 39:1047-1057, 1976; R. M. Liebert, J. M. Neale and E. S. Davidson, The Early Window: Effects of Television on Children and Youth, Elmsford, New York: Pergamon Press, 1973.

8 See Bradley S. Greenberg and Charles K. Atkin, "Learning about Minorities from Television: The Research Agenda," paper presented for the Conference "Television and the Socialization of the Minority Child," University of California at Los Angeles, April, 1978; Cherry A. Banks, "A Content Analysis of the Treatment of Black Americans on Television," a paper presented to the U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (National Institute of Education), Seattle, Washington, April 1976 (ERIC Number 115 576); Vaughnicile, Molden "Telecommunications and Black Americans: A Survey of Ownership Participation and Control," Ph.D. dissertation, Washington University, 1975.

9 See Gerald F. Kline, and Phillip J. Tichenor (eds.), Current Perspectives in Mass Communication Research (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1972).

10 See Stuart H. Surlin and Elizabeth Bowden, "The Psychological Effect

of Television Characters: The Case of Archie Bunker and Authoritarian Viewers," a paper presented for the Mass Communication and Society Division of the Association for Education in Journalism Convention, College Park, Maryland, 1976.

11 See John C. Brigham and Linda W. Giesbrecht, "All in the Family: Racial Attitudes," Journal of Communication XXVI, Autumn, 1976.

12 See Charles Osgood, George Suci and Percy H. Tannenbaum, The Measurement of Meaning, Chicago: University of Illinois Press (8th Printing), 1971, 76-126; Fred Kerlinger, Foundations of Behavioral Research, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968, 564-580.

13 See J. J. Woodmansee and S. W. Cook, The Multi-factor Racial Attitude Inventory, Attitude Research Project, Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado, 1965.

14 Nielsen Television Index, "NTI's Newest Release Profiles Non-White vs. White Television Viewing," A. C. Nielsen Co., 2:10-11, 1979.

TABLE I

FREQUENCY OF VIEWING BY RACE OF VIEWERS

TELEVISION SERIES		Means		
Black-oriented		Black	Non-Black	F-Ratios
Good Times	M	3.32	1.94	57.503 *
	SD	1.28	1.05	
The Jeffersons	M	3.64	2.39	45.099 *
	SD	1.21	1.29	
What's Happening	M	3.69	2.45	36.225 *
	SD	1.33	1.42	
General-Audience				
LaVerne and Shirley	M	3.19	3.22	.018
	SD	1.40	1.40	
Welcome Back, Kotter	M	2.94	2.72	1.25
	SD	1.30	1.28	
Three's Company	M	3.54	3.80	1.46
	SD	1.40	1.39	

* p .01

NOTE: The higher mean score indicates greater viewing.

TABLE II

RACE DIFFERENCES on THREE FACTORS of VIEWER PERCEPTIONS

			EVALUATIVE FACTOR			REALITY FACTOR			IDENTIFICATION FACTOR		
			Black Respondents	Non-Black Respondents	F-Ratio	Black Respondents	Non-black Respondents	F-Ratio	Black Respondents	Non-black Respondents	F-Ratio
Black TV Characters	JJ	M	38.42	32.96	20.61 *	6.96	5.64	15.72*	3.92	3.21	6.56 *
		SD	7.51	8.94		2.22	2.21		1.85	1.71	
	George	M	41.52	35.21	23.17	7.73	6.96	5.88**	5.17	4.06	9.70*
		SD	8.47	9.28		1.98	2.30		2.27	2.33	
	Dee	M	43.70	36.75	22.56*	7.54	6.25	13.90	4.34	3.83	2.30
		SD	9.11	10.95		2.37	2.70		2.33	2.24	
	Louise	M	52.27	45.30		8.18	6.91	14.31*	5.36	4.42	5.43 **
		SD	7.40	12.31	25.33*	2.02	2.64		2.68	2.65	
	Chrissy	M	43.56	45.75	2.95	6.08	6.84	3.97**	3.87	4.23	1.23
		SD	8.12	9.22		2.59	2.40		2.17	2.25	-1.09
Non-Black TV Characters	Horschak	M	40.60	37.07	8.72 *	5.71	4.68	7.79*	3.35	3.54	.47
		SD	7.49	8.80		2.49	2.31		1.86	1.92	
	LaVerne	M	40.16	42.46	2.75	6.35	6.39	.02	4.15	4.31	.219
		SD	9.67	8.21		2.41	2.33		2.30	2.42	
	Kotter	M	49.00	45.43	7.87*	6.88	7.01	.15	4.82	5.50	3.03
		SD	8.39	8.53		2.33	2.29		2.59	2.65	

* p .01 ** p .05

CORRELATIONS of MRAI (RACIAL ATTITUDE) WITH VIEWER

PERCEPTION SCORES by RACE of VIEWERS

Characters	Evaluative Correlation		Reality Correlation		Identification Correlation	
	Blacks	Non-Blacks	Blacks	Non-Blacks	Blacks	Non-Blacks
	(142)	(65)	(142)	(65)	(142)	(65)
JJ[1]	- .11	+ .13	- .00	+ .09	- .02	- .01
George[1]	- .05	+ .08	+ .17*	+ .10	- .09	+ .14
Chrissy	+ .04	- .32 *	- .01	- .07	- .10	- .28 *
Horschak	- .03	+ .05	- .04	- .04	- .15	+ .02
Dee[1]	- .08	+ .31 *	+ .06	+ .03	- .07	+ .18
Louise[1]	- .03	+ .24 *	+ .08	+ .13	- .02	+ .07
LaVerne	- .11	+ .00	+ .02	- .00	- .17 *	- .12
Kotter	+ .01	+ .08	- .07	- .13	- .10	- .03

* p .05

[1] Black television characters